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# In MLK Week Keynote, Judge Implores Future Attorneys to be Citizen Soldiers

Judge Carlton W. Reeves earned praise in 2015 after a searing speech from the bench on the state of race relations in Mississippi and across the U.S.



January 25, 2016 | Michael M. Bowden

**BRISTOL, R.I.** – At the culmination of a captivating, often emotional, frequently humorous address at RWU Law on Thursday, the speaker paused, surveyed his audience, then slowly intoned:

“I am Carlton W. Reeves, district judge of the Southern District of Mississippi – and I sit in the seat once held by William Harold Cox” – a reference to the virulently racist judge immortalized in the 1988 film “Mississippi Burning,” dramatizing the case of *United States v. Price* (1965) against the murderers of three Mississippi civil rights workers.

The packed house – made up of students, alumni, professors, members of the state and federal judiciary, the U.S. attorney and the head of the Providence NAACP, among many others – erupted into a standing ovation. It was the school’s 11<sup>th</sup> annual Martin Luther King Week address.

One year ago, in sentencing three men convicted of the hate-motivated murder of a black man, Reeves delivered a searing speech from the bench on the state of race relations in Mississippi and across the U.S. In two memorable Civil Rights decisions – one on racial equality and one of same-sex marriage

rights – he has made news (and history) by his acknowledgement of how different and diverse perspectives or prejudices can impact an individual's actions towards and views of others.

But while he gamely discussed those cases during a genial Q&A session following his lecture, his formal speech focused entirely on the work of Dr. King, in particular his phrase “citizen soldiers” to describe those working to change America through nonviolent efforts to promote equal rights. After reviewing the work of numerous “citizen soldiers” from his native Mississippi, and the dramatic improvements in racial equality there over the past few decades (particularly in the legal field), Reeves called upon his Rhode Island audience to carry on the work.

King, he said, “refused to accept the idea that a man's present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal ‘ought-ness’ that forever confronts him. That deep respect for humanity, that core belief that good will triumph over evil every time. King knew something: Mississippi has changed. The United States has changed. The citizen soldiers have changed its nature. And now it is time for our next generation, this generation, to be citizen soldiers.

“Follow your passion. You know what the issues are, and there are many of them – from the schoolhouse to the jailhouse: Criminal justice reform. Sentencing guidelines reform. Making sure that collateral consequences do not further bind and chain and burden criminal defendants for all of their lives. No child needs to suffer for a crime that a child did as a juvenile for his entire life. We need to stand up for those children who are caught up in the foster care system. Police reform. Prosecutorial reform. Economic inequality; dealing with the haves and the have-nots. Citizen soldiers need to be out there doing that. Education inequality. Citizen soldiers have to stand up for immigrant children – and immigrant adults.

With a message to the future attorneys in the room, Reeves focused on how the citizen soldier concept applies to the legal world.

“You as lawyers and students here, you have or will have a unique and special power, because you will be given the key to the courthouse. And only you will have the prerogative to open that door. Because one thing about lawyers and judges – we make sure we protect that courthouse. That's my challenge to you: *be the citizen soldiers of this new generation.*

“Whether we are black or white, Jew or Gentile, immigrant or native born, rich or poor, gay or straight, whatever our differences are – what we need is to have love and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within this country. There are those out there who would peddle hate and division, fear and distrust. There are those who are masters of confusion and deception. Reject those notions. Believe in the capacity of the greatness of America. Drop yourself into that uncomfortable, unquenchable, indomitable American spirit. Have that audacious faith, like Dr. Martin Luther King. Look beyond what you're speaking to. Speak to the future. Be the cause of that revolution.

“And remember,” Reeves said in closing. “Voting has consequences.”

Reeves is a 1986 graduate of Jackson State University with a major in political science, and he obtained his law degree from the University of Virginia School of Law in 1989. He has enjoyed a distinguished career as a lawyer and a jurist.

Upon graduating from law school, he clerked for Justice Reuben V. Anderson of the Mississippi Supreme Court. He practiced law with the Phelps Dunbar law firm before serving as assistant United States attorney, chief of the civil division for the Southern District of Mississippi. He served nationally on the Department of Justice Civil Chiefs Working Group and was awarded a certificate of commendation for the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice. Immediately prior to his nomination to the federal district court by President Barack Obama in 2010, Reeves was engaged in private practice with Pigott Reeves Johnson, P.A., a law firm he co-founded in 2001.

Reeves has served on numerous boards and commissions, including those of the ACLU of Mississippi, Mississippi Workers Center for Human Rights, Mississippi Center for Justice, Mississippi Access to Justice Commission, Mississippi Center for Legal Services and the Mississippi Capital Defense Resource Center. He is also the recipient of many honors and awards including the Magnolia Bar's highest honor, the R. Jess Brown Award. He was named the Mississippi Association of Justice's Distinguished Jurist of the Year for 2014-15.